



Three paths of AI adoption

A guide to choosing the right
approach for your business

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Should I just use the AI built into my existing platform, or should I build it separately and integrate it across my systems?

I hear this question over and over again in boardrooms and strategy sessions. Sometimes it's about a chatbot. Other times it's about analytics, sales enablement or customer support. **My answer is always the same: It depends on where you want to go with your AI journey and where you are today.**

Enterprises have three primary paths for adopting AI:

1. Enterprise AI (the build path)

Centralized platforms that unify governance, data and AI at scale. Typically adopted as an extension of the modern data platform, they enable organizations to build custom AI models and AI solutions on top of a well-orchestrated data foundation. Enterprise AI is commonly tied directly to the enterprise and data strategy, emerging as part of a broader modernization effort rather than a one-off project.

[Zoom in](#)

2. Platform-native AI (the buy-and-extend path)

AI capabilities embedded directly into SaaS platforms like customer relationship management (CRM), enterprise resource planning (ERP) or IT service management (ITSM) systems. They deliver immediate productivity gains inside existing workflows, with customization centered mainly on — and deeply integrated into — the specialized processes those platforms orchestrate (e.g. sales, service, HR). Platform-native AI is usually tied to the functional strategy of a department, making it a fast way to show value.

[Zoom in](#)

3. AI-first point solutions (the buy-and-plug-in path)

Third-party products built to solve a specific problem with precision. They come with pre-trained, domain-specific models, often developed on massive, specialized datasets like sales conversations, call transcripts or medical images. These point solutions are typically less about building custom AI and more about slotting into existing workflows to provide highly targeted, domain-specific capabilities.

Zoom in

But here's the catch: **Most organizations are already doing a little bit of all three, but without a clear strategy or plan of attack.** The customer experience (CX) team might be piloting a point solution for agent assistants. The sales team is going all-in on **implementing Salesforce Agentforce**. Meanwhile, IT is investing heavily in Databricks to build custom machine learning (ML) models that predict next-best actions or map institutional knowledge.

Sound familiar? You're not alone. Most enterprises lack a clear vision for how these paths fit together, and that's where the risks creep in.

Each path has a time and place. Each brings benefits and risks. The challenge is deciding which approach makes sense for your business right now and how to weave them together into a long-term strategy.

Spoiler: There's usually a place for each path inside a single organization. The challenge is deciding which approach makes sense in which context, and how to weave them into a cohesive long-term strategy.



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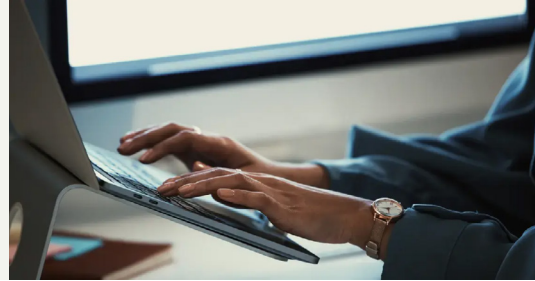


Path one: Enterprise AI

Enterprise AI platforms are the most **comprehensive and foundational approach** to AI adoption. They sit above individual business systems, connect directly to enterprise data and provide the governance, scale and security needed to make AI a true enterprise capability.

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These aren't just tools for data scientists. They are the **platforms where organizations can both govern AI and build it**. That includes everything from advanced ML models to custom AI apps tailored to business needs.

At their best, enterprise AI platforms enable:

- **Centralized governance and risk controls** to track which models are in use, what data they access and whether they meet compliance standards.
- **A federated development model** so professional developers can build advanced ML models (e.g. next-best-action engines, sentiment analysis pipelines, predictive intent models) while citizen developers use no-code tools to assemble lightweight copilots that automate everyday workflows.
- **Enterprise-wide integration** so AI doesn't just live in one platform, but plugs into CRM, ITSM, ERP, point of sale (POS) and every other system where employees work.
- **Access to enterprise data across the organization** — sales, operations, finance, supply chain — is the secret sauce that makes AI powerful and unlocks use cases other paths can't.
- **Transparency and security** so leaders know which LLMs are running, how they're trained and whether enterprise data is protected from misuse or exposure.
- **Custom AI development** for the ability to design, test and deploy models and applications unique to your business, trained on your **proprietary datasets**, not someone else's.

Defining feature: the enterprise AI hub. This hub creates a single entry point where employees across functions can access AI services, build copilots and track usage. Leaders can enforce guardrails and monitor risk from the hub, ensuring that the same enterprise data that makes AI powerful doesn't also become a liability.

For instance, a global manufacturer could use an enterprise AI platform as an extension to its data platform as its backbone. Developers build predictive models that forecast equipment failures and optimize production schedules, while business users create copilots that automate quality inspections and summarize daily output. Because the platform connects data from sales, operations and supply chain, AI can do more than improve one workflow — it can share insights across functions. In this scenario:

- Sales teams can anticipate delivery timelines with greater accuracy.
- Operations can adjust staffing based on real-time demand forecasts.
- Supply chain leaders can optimize inventory based on predictive sales models.

All of this happens under a single governance framework, across clouds and with data integration into systems like CRM, ITSM and POS, ensuring AI supports the entire value chain.

The trade-off: Enterprise AI requires more upfront investment, alignment and maturity than the other two paths. But for organizations where AI is strategic, particularly in highly regulated industries, it's the only path that enables both **enterprise-wide governance** and **true custom AI development** at scale.

Path two: Platform-native AI

The second path is **platform-native AI**, where AI tools and capabilities are embedded directly into the **SaaS platforms** enterprises already rely on (e.g. CRM, ERP, ITSM systems). These tools are attractive because they deliver **immediate value inside existing workflows**, with customization deeply integrated into the specialized processes those platforms orchestrate. AI shows up where employees already work (e.g. drafting sales emails, summarizing tickets, suggesting next steps), making AI adoption seamless and productivity gains immediate.

Turning economic headwinds into AI tailwinds: Why smart companies are investing in AI now, not later



The appeal of platform-native AI is obvious:

- **Fast time to value** — No new platforms or rollouts, just AI inside familiar workflows.
- **Ease of adoption** — Employees use AI where they already spend their day.
- **Guided customization** — Admins and power users can create prompts, configure workflows and even build lightweight copilots inside the platform, but customization is constrained to that vendor's ecosystem.

For instance, a contact center could use AI features embedded directly into its **contact center as a service (CCaaS) and CRM platforms**. Digital agents handle routine inquiries up front (e.g. answering common questions, resetting passwords, scheduling callbacks), reducing the load on human agents. When conversations reach an agent, an **AI-powered assistant** works in the background to summarize the customer's history, flag sentiment shifts and suggest compliant, empathetic responses in real time. Because all of this happens inside the same platform agents already use, the AI tightly aligns to service workflows, adoption feels natural and both efficiency and customer satisfaction improve quickly.

But platform-native AI also comes with trade-offs:

- **Limited customization** — You can create prompts and copilots, but typically, you can't build fully custom AI models or apps that cut across the business the way enterprise AI allows.
- **Restricted data access** — The AI typically works best within its own platform. Connecting to enterprise-wide data (e.g. sales + operations + finance + supply chain) is more limited.
- **Security and privacy concerns** — Enterprises often don't know what LLM is running, or how data is being handled.
- **Inconsistent governance** — If every platform has its own AI assistant, you end up with shadow AI (i.e. employees using unauthorized AI tools or applications) popping up across the enterprise without oversight.
- **Vendor lock-in** — Once AI becomes embedded in a SaaS platform, switching vendors or bringing that AI elsewhere can be difficult.

- **Incremental costs** — Advanced AI features often come as premium add-ons or usage-based charges, which can add up quickly at scale.
- **Usability limits** — The AI is only as valuable as the workflows it is part of. Outside the platform's processes, its impact can be marginalized.

Platform-native AI has a fundamental role to play, especially for organizations early in their AI journey. But without a broader enterprise strategy, it can quickly create silos and increase risk rather than delivering on the full promise of AI.

Path three: AI-first point solutions

The third path is **AI-first point solutions**, meaning standalone products built from the ground up with AI at their core. These aren't broad platforms or embedded features. Instead, they're **plug-and-play tools** designed to solve one problem exceptionally well and deliver value immediately.

AI-point solutions are already transforming workflows in a targeted manner, such as:

- AI-powered clienteling in retail
- Digital agents handling routine customer interactions in telecommunications
- Advanced risk scoring in financial services and diagnostics in healthcare

What makes these solutions so effective is that their models are often trained on highly specific datasets (e.g. millions of call recordings, sales conversations or annotated medical images), giving them depth and accuracy that general-purpose platforms can't match out of the box.

These solutions are often brought to market by high-growth companies with investment backing. The space is highly competitive, with multiple players tackling similar problems, which means innovation is rapid, but long-term viability can vary. For enterprises, these tools are a fast way to experiment and capture value, but also a category to approach with an eye toward integration and sustainability.

The advantages are clear:

- **Best-in-class performance** — Solutions are highly tuned for the specific use cases they serve.

- **Rapid deployment** — Minimal setup is required, often API-driven or directly integrated into existing workflows.
- **Domain expertise baked in** — Models are optimized using industry-specific data and workflows.

For instance, an Ecommerce customer experience team could deploy an AI assistant that coaches agents in real time. The system analyzes live conversations, detects shifts in sentiment and recommends responses that improve empathy, compliance and even opportunities for upsell or cross-sell. Within weeks, agents handle calls more efficiently, customer satisfaction scores rise, new hires reach proficiency faster and average order values climb.

But like the other two paths, AI-first point solutions come with trade-offs:

- **Narrow scope** — Point solutions solve one problem very well, but rarely extend beyond that domain.
- **Vendor lock-in** — Once embedded into workflows, switching providers without disruption is difficult.
- **Market volatility** — Many of these tools come from younger vendors in a highly competitive market. Choosing one is a bet that the company will continue to innovate, keep pace in a fast-moving industry and remain financially viable over the long term.
- **Fragmentation and costs** — When multiple departments adopt their own point solutions, enterprises face a patchwork of disconnected tools and a stack of licensing fees that grows quickly without delivering enterprise-wide leverage.
- **Integration gaps** — While easy to plug in, point solutions often operate in and perpetuate silos, limiting enterprise-wide data sharing.
- **Governance blind spots** — IT and compliance may lack visibility into how these tools use or store data.
- **Scalability limits** — Point solutions are effective for one department, but rarely extensible across the enterprise.

The path of AI-first point solutions is often the fastest path to **tangible business impact**. They quickly prove the value of AI in focused areas. But long term, they need to be woven into a broader AI strategy, or risk creating yet another silo.

Orchestrating your AI adoption strategy: Integrating the three paths

AI is here, it's exciting and its impact is undeniable. But for most enterprises, the real question isn't whether to use AI, but **how to get your hands around it all**.

And often, it's not one singular path: **There's a place for all three paths inside an organization**. The key is knowing when to lean into each and how to make sure they complement, not compete with, one another:

- **Enterprise AI is the build path.** It's where you create custom models and apps trained on your proprietary data, governed centrally, and integrated across the enterprise. It takes investment, but it creates long-term competitive advantage.
- **Platform-native AI is the buy-and-extend path.** It's fast, accessible and embedded in daily workflows. But each platform brings its own governance quirks. Without enterprise oversight, you risk a patchwork of assistants with no consistent guardrails.
- **AI-first point solutions are the buy-and-plug-in path.** They deliver immediate value in specific areas, often with models trained on highly specialized datasets. But without governance, they quickly become silos, raising questions about data security, compliance and duplication.

The thread that ties it all together? Being smart about your tools and your data.

It's not about grabbing every new AI product that pops up. Instead, it's about choosing carefully where each one fits and how they work together.

That means thinking through how you'll connect your data across the business and ensuring you have the proper guardrails in place to govern both the data and the AI solutions that use it. Skip that, and you end up with silos, leaks and regulatory headaches. Do it well, and you get AI that's powerful, safe and built to last.

How the benefits of each path change by organization size

- **Large enterprises:** You already have AI spread across multiple platforms and point solutions. The challenge isn't adoption, but orchestration. Governance is the glue. Large organizations should focus on designing an AI operating model that brings order to the chaos. That means

consolidating oversight, aligning to compliance frameworks and scaling enterprise AI as the long-term backbone.

- **Mid-market enterprises:** You often sit in the middle — too complex for one-size-fits-all point solutions, but not always resourced for a full enterprise AI build-out. The sweet spot is usually a hybrid approach: Leverage platform-native AI for quick wins, experiment with point solutions in high-value areas and begin laying the foundation for enterprise AI (i.e. data strategy, governance, operating model) so you can scale when ready.
- **Small and midsize businesses (SMBs):** You may not need the same level of complexity, but you do need guardrails. Even with just a handful of tools, lightweight governance (e.g. approved vendor lists, data usage policies, clear accountability) protects against missteps and sets the stage for future scale.

Understand that no company adopts AI in one big leap. Instead, it happens step by step, across functions and through different entry points. The organizations that succeed don't chase every new tool, but **bring order to the chaos** with a clear north star, a practical plan and governance that allows innovation without losing control.

In other words, AI success isn't about picking one path. It's about balancing build and buy solutions, piloting responsibly and putting **data and AI strategy** alongside governance at the center of your AI journey. That's how you move from scattered experiments to enterprise advantage without losing control along the way.



Unlock your AI potential: Practical recommendations for getting started

Adopting AI isn't about picking the "right" path once and for all. It's about knowing where each path fits, when to use it and how to make them work together. The organizations that succeed are those that start small, learn quickly and build a foundation of governance and data strategy that scales. Think of this as a journey. Experiment, refine and then decide how to double down. A responsible approach looks like:

1

Build an AI strategy, not just pilots.

Don't stop at experimenting. Define your north star for AI, outline how each of the three AI adoption paths fits and ensure every investment ladders back to that strategy.

2

Pilot with purpose. Use point solutions or platform-native AI to pilot use cases and prove value, but make sure every pilot is logged, monitored and tied back to enterprise policies.

3

Balance the trade-offs. Every choice has a cost: speed vs. scale, vendor lock-in vs. control, off-the-shelf vs. proprietary. Put those trade-offs on the table so leaders can make informed decisions, rather than letting shadow AI dictate outcomes.

4

Define your AI operating model. Decide early how AI will be governed. Who approves new tools? Who owns risk and compliance? How are models monitored once they're live? Without a clear operating model, AI adoption quickly turns into chaos.

5

Bake in governance from day one.

Establish clear rules for data use, model transparency and security controls up front. Otherwise, you'll spend more time cleaning up shadow AI than creating tangible enterprise advantages.

6

Be smart about your build vs.

buy options. If a point solution already does the job at 90%, buy it — but bring it under governance. Save build efforts for where your proprietary data gives you a competitive edge.

Ready to take the next step? Whether you're still experimenting with point solutions, leaning into platform-native AI or laying the groundwork for an enterprise-wide strategy. I'd be happy to share lessons learned, compare approaches and help chart the right path for your AI journey.



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